



# YOSEMITE

## NATIONAL PARK

*"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."*

— John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 1869

## PLANNING UPDATE

Volume 27

February 2005

*"Now the Draft Revised Merced River Plan is in your hands and we are turning to you in this next phase of its development"*

Dear Yosemite Friends,

Later this year, the National Park Service will launch a number of new planning efforts. To help keep you informed, we intend to dust off this *Planning Update* newsletter and bring you the latest information as we move forward.

To date, the most notable project underway is the release for public review of the *Draft Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* (Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS). This issue of the *Planning Update* will highlight some of the revised plan's basic elements—including why the plan is being revised and what is being addressed.



Through March 22, we hope you will take some time to acquaint yourself with its alternatives and drop us a line with your written comments (see back panel). I also invite you to attend one of our upcoming public meetings to be held in various locations throughout California (see schedule on page 4).

Since the end of the summer, the planning team (all individuals deeply committed to the protection of the Merced River) has spent long hours developing this draft plan. Now the Draft Revised Merced River Plan is in your hands and we are turning to you in this next phase of its development. When we take this draft on the road, the team will be happy to talk with you about the revisions in this plan. But even moreso, we will be listening to your suggestions. Together with the public we serve, we can craft a final plan that will help guide the future management of the Merced River corridor in ways that will protect and enhance its unique values for years—and generations— to come.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Tollefson



## WHY A REVISED PLAN?

The National Park Service was directed by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to prepare a “new or revised” comprehensive management plan that addressed what it saw as two deficiencies:

1. The user capacity program outlined in the 2000 plan (the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection [VERP] framework) was not fully developed and only presented sample standards and indicators. The user capacity program in this revised plan must contain “specific measurable limits on use.”
2. The river corridor boundary in El Portal must be drawn to account for the protection and enhancement of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values in this segment.

In addition, in a separate decision, the U.S. District Court directed the National Park Service to detail how the Merced River Plan amends the *General Management Plan*.

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*Kristina Rylands wrote and edited this issue with contributions from Jen Nersesian.*

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# Draft Revised Merced River Plan Open For Comment

The comment period for the *Draft Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* (Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS) will be open until March 22, 2005. During that time, the public is invited to review the document and provide written comments on the plan's four alternatives.

## WHAT IS BEING REVISED?

The plan's revision focuses on two components of the original 2000 Merced River Plan: the establishment of a user capacity and the reassessment of the corridor boundaries in El Portal. The Merced River Plan's other management elements (boundaries, classifications, Outstandingly Remarkable Values, management zoning, River Protection Overlay, Section 7 determination process) remain in place, as approved in 2000.

## WHAT IS PROPOSED?

### USER CAPACITY

The four alternatives evaluated in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS propose new limits on use. These would be added to the use management tools that have been at work in Yosemite for decades, including the existing Wilderness Trailhead Quota System.

Establishing quotas on the numbers of people entering the river corridor is not enough to protect the river's unique values. In all of the action alternatives, a monitoring process grounded in science will be mobilized to better track the connection between levels of use and possible impacts to the river. If monitoring shows that impacts are occurring, park managers could choose from a number of management actions. These actions would range from increasing education and awareness about impacts in a given area, to temporarily redirecting use away from areas where damage is occurring. The plan also lays out the decision-making process.

To facilitate the on-the-ground protection of river values, the user capacity program enlists a system of indicators and standards, which is part of a process known as the Visitor Experience and Resource



Protection (VERP) program. **Indicators** identify those qualities that serve as early warning signs to better highlight where too much use may be occurring. **Standards** are then established to set the bar for when action should be taken to prevent or reverse impacts. These indicators and standards are specific, measurable, and reflect the kinds of visitor experience qualities and resource conditions expected in different segments of the corridor. Working in concert with the monitoring program, the National Park Service would be able to take more responsive action to protect values—including protecting the experience of visitors—in the river corridor.

The plan's alternatives also propose other specific limits that would be in place alongside the VERP user capacity program. Alternative 2 proposes interim limits on facilities until the VERP program is fully functioning and providing direction on ways to manage use. Alternative 3 proposes fixed visitor use limits by river segment, and Alternative 4 brings the limits into closer focus by establishing fixed quotas within individual management zones. In the long term, Alternatives 3 and 4 also propose an annual cap on the number of users in the river corridor.

## EL PORTAL BOUNDARY

In addition to user capacity, the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS evaluates new El Portal corridor boundary alternatives that are based on the protection and enhancement of river values—known as Outstandingly Remarkable Values. All of the action alternatives include areas encompassing the Outstandingly Remarkable Values to within a quarter-mile of the river. The alternatives also propose different management zoning scenarios to prescribe the types of facilities and activities allowed within specific areas.

### CHECK IT OUT Quick Reference to the Plan's Alternatives

#### USER CAPACITY TABLES

- Alt. 1 No Action: page II-25
- Alt. 2 Interim Facility Limits with VERP Monitoring: pages II-32 & 33
- Alt. 3 Segment Quotas with VERP Monitoring: page II-59
- Alt. 4 Management Zone Quotas with VERP Monitoring: page II-65

#### EL PORTAL BOUNDARY MAPS

- Alt. 1: page II-28
- Alt. 2: page II-55
- Alt. 3: page II-63
- Alt. 4: page II-71

The document can be viewed online at [www.nps.gov/yose/planning/mrp/](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning/mrp/). It is also available in hard copy and on CD ROM. To request a copy, call 209/379-1365 or write to the information listed on the back panel of this newsletter.



## TAKING MANAGEMENT ACTION

Interpretive signs educate and inform park users. They can also be used to direct foot traffic around or away from natural resource restoration areas. This is one example of how management can take action to protect river values.

## APPROXIMATE SCHEDULE FOR THE REVISED MERCED RIVER PLAN

Through March 22, 2005

Written comments will be accepted.

Spring 2005

Comments received during the public review period are analyzed and a Final Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS is prepared.

Mid-Summer 2005

The Final Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS is released to the public, followed by a 30-day waiting period.

End of Summer 2005

Record of Decision is scheduled to be signed by the National Park Service Pacific West Regional Director.

# Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS

## Schedule of Public Meetings

### FORMAT & TIMES

Open House: 5:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.  
 Presentation: 6:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.  
 Public Hearing: 6:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

### SCHEDULE

Parking is free unless otherwise indicated.  
 All venues accessible for persons with mobility impairments.  
 Sign language interpreter available with 1-week notice.

Tues.	Feb. 22	El Portal	El Portal Elementary School, Rancheria Flat Rd.
Wed.	Feb. 23	San Francisco	Fort Mason, Building 201 (Bay & Franklin Streets)
Thurs.	Feb. 24	Burbank	Burbank Airport Hilton and Convention Center 2500 Hollywood Way (\$5 parking fee)
Fri.	Feb. 25	Oakhurst	Oakhurst Community Center, 3980 Road 425-B
Mon.	Feb. 28	Mammoth	Mammoth Lakes Community Center, 1000 Forest Trail
Tues.	Mar. 1	Sacramento	American River College (cafeteria) 4700 College Oak Dr. (\$1 parking fee)
Wed.	Mar. 2	Clovis	Clovis Memorial Building, Veterans Room, 453 Hughes Ave.
Thurs.	Mar. 3	Merced	Merced Civic Center, Sam Pipes Room (first floor) 678 W. 18th Street
Fri.	Mar. 4	Mariposa	Mariposa Government Center, 5100 Bullion Street
Mon.	Mar. 7	Groveland	Tenaya School, 19177 State Hwy. 120

### NPS OPEN HOUSE

Tues.	Feb. 22	Yosemite Valley	Visitor Center East Auditorium Open House: 10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Presentation: 11:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. Public Hearing: 11:30 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
Fri.	Mar. 18	Yosemite Valley	Visitor Center East Auditorium 2:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. (Written comments accepted, but no formal public hearing)



Merced River Gorge

# What will the Revised Merced River Plan mean for a visit to Yosemite?

In the short term, adoption of this plan is not expected to result in dramatic changes.

Many aspects of the user capacity program have been successfully in place for years, and the new specific measurable limits being added are based on existing facility and use levels. However, over the longer term, management actions may be required to keep conditions within the standards established in the monitoring program. This would likely result in some changes to better manage and redirect use in the river corridor.



Swinging Bridge, Wawona

## WILL VISITORS BE TURNED AWAY AT THE GATES?

Turning people away at entrance gates – or otherwise closing park entrances – is *not* a proposal under the preferred alternative of the Draft Revised Merced River Plan. The plan's intent is to closely monitor visitor experience and resource conditions in the river corridor and effectively respond to impacts with management actions that will protect and enhance the river's unique values. If limits are reached on busy days in the summer, visitors might be directed to other areas of the park or to other less crowded portions of Yosemite Valley. It is also expected that more responsive and timely communication with gateway communities, bus operators, and visitors who are in route to the park will help control the timing of people entering the Merced River corridor on the busiest days.

The elements outlined in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan would augment the park's existing user capacity management practices. For years, the National Park Service has controlled visitation in Yosemite by managing occupancy at campsites and lodging facilities, using the Wilderness Trailhead Quota System, and attending parking and directing traffic at busy intersections. Some proposed management actions may require additional environmental review and public input before implementation, others may not.

The National Park Service is committed to maintaining the transparency of the VERP user capacity program in order to provide greater accountability and opportunities for public involvement. The Draft Revised Merced River Plan calls for quarterly updates and an annual report presenting the results of monitoring and other management actions. The first VERP public meeting was held in October 2004 and the National Park Service is preparing its annual VERP report (to be released to the public in late February or early March) followed by another public meeting in April. Watch the park's web site for future meeting dates ([www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning)).

## CHECK IT OUT

For more on MANAGEMENT ACTIONS, refer to pages II-50 to 52 in the plan.

## PUBLIC SCOPING OPEN

### PARKWIDE INVASIVE PLANT MANAGEMENT PLAN ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Through February 15, the public is invited to submit written ideas and concerns regarding the Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan.

Invasive, non-native plants are species introduced from other parts of the world that can have severe negative impacts on native plants and animals in Yosemite. If invasive species continue to spread unchecked, the park's diverse tapestry of native plant and animal communities would be disrupted. Park visitors would view an unnatural, altered landscape. Controlling the threat of invasive plants is essential to protecting the ecological integrity and visitor experience in Yosemite National Park.

The Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan will evaluate alternatives for a comprehensive, prioritized program of prevention, control, systematic monitoring, and research. Control methods may include hand-pulling, use of weed removal mechanical tools, release of predatory insects or fungus, and the judicious use of chemical treatments derived from natural products such as vinegar and/or manufactured chemicals such as glyphosate.

To submit scoping comments—OR—to request a copy of the document when it is released in spring 2006, contact the park in writing (refer to back panel of newsletter).

The status of this project will be periodically updated on the park's planning web site at [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning).

## Sign up for the Yosemite Electronic Newsletter

[www.nps.gov/yose/home.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/home.htm)



Nevada Fall

## Your Comments Count!

Help Yosemite by providing thoughtful comments aimed at building a better plan. One well-considered comment can make a difference. The comments most useful in evaluating the draft plan—and ultimately shaping the final plan—are those that:

- Are specific and directed to a particular plan element or alternative.
- Identify incomplete or erroneous information.
- Offer specific reasons why a particular alternative or plan element would or would not work.
- Offer a reasonable, new plan element or alternative that would help accomplish the plan's goals.
- Point out discrepancies between legal mandates and proposals.
- Provide specific information about how you use the areas in the river corridor and how particular proposals in the plan would affect that use.

The public involvement period is underway and will close on March 22, 2005.

Mail comments to: Superintendent  
Attn: Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS  
P.O. Box 577  
Yosemite, CA 95389

Email comments to: [Yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:Yose_planning@nps.gov)

FAX comments to: 209/379-1294

Give your oral testimony at one of the public meetings listed on page 4.



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*Thanks for your help!*